

from Swanny's Ways · Steve Katz

I STARED AT THE KNIFE. He sat relaxed in the slime of his being, confident that I wasn't going to do it, or that he could handle it if I tried. I should have done it, six inches of blade in my hand. But he was too close. I could smell him through his cologne. I didn't want to be that close to the putrid beast. I didn't want to touch him. Not him. If I'd had a gun.

"See, if you were getting paid for it you'd do it in a second. Then you'd go home with a hard-on and fuck your girlfriend. Revenge is just a dry hump."

We pulled into one of the remote parking lots at Kennedy. I was so stupid, I didn't even realize it was a strange place to catch a plane. Emilio got out and opened the door for Kutzer. He stepped out, turned his back, and when he turned to look at me he had a Smith and Wesson fitted with a silencer pointed at my head.

"Get out of the car, Swanny," he said.

"I thought you didn't carry a gun," I said.

"Emilio let me use this one. Is this your gun, Emilio?"

"Nah." Emilio grinned.

"You know," Kutzer said. "You are the kid I used to catch jerking off in the boy's room."

"I think you're making a mistake, Kutzer."

He squeezed the trigger, and my brain welcomed a small bullet that burned through, pushing aside all irrelevant garbage located there. Killers kill, I thought. I guess that's what I needed to know.

RED SHIFT: DREAMTIME

We pull into one of the remote parking lots at Kennedy. I am so out of it I don't even realize that this is a strange place to catch a plane. Kostas gets out and opens the door for Kutzer. He steps out with his back to me. When he turns again to look at me he has a gun fitted with a silencer pointed at my head.

"What's that, a P .38 police model, isn't it? That silencer is made in England, right?"

"Get out of the car, kid," he says.

“I thought it was below you to use a cop gun.”

“Kostas gave me the gun. I don’t ask its religion. You got a thing against cops?”

“No. Not me. I wouldn’t mind seeing some right now. I thought you were more the Smith and Wesson .357 magnum kind of a guy. I bet the silencer belongs to you.”

“You know something,” Kutzer says. “You are the kid who used to jerk me off in the boy’s room.”

I dive at his legs and his first shot goes way up in the air, a second wangs off the top of the limo. He falls when I hit him and the gun clatters across the pavement. All I am thinking is, “Get the gun. Get the gun.” Just as I am about to grab the tip of the barrel my hand is crunched by the heel of a size fourteen wing-tip Florsheim. Kostas puts all his weight on it, severing some tendons, breaking small bones just below the knuckles. All I’m thinking is it might not have been so bad if he hadn’t put a new leather heel on the shoe that morning. All I’m thinking is that I won’t be able to use the left hand for a while to play handball with Peter. That’s all I’m thinking when Kostas jerks me upright and holds me while Kutzer grabs the gun and lowers it on my head.

“That gun is embarrassing,” I say. “I think I’m a magnum kind of a hit, Kutzer, and you are the rotting afterbirth from your syphilitic mother’s womb. I vomit on your face, then I piss on that vomit.”

“You wanna jerk me off again, kid?”

I struggle against Kostas, but he has made his living holding lightweights like me.

“Let him go,” says Kutzer.

“Uunngh!” says Kostas, but not without first tearing my right arm out of joint at the shoulder. All I am thinking is, “There goes the rest of my handball game.”

Kutzer squeezes the trigger, and my brain welcomes a large bullet dragging behind it into the space of my skull all the thought garbage that was ever dumped into the world. My last thought is, “It’s the real thing. Light up a Pepsi and be sure.” At least that’s what I seem to say at the end; at any rate, that’s how things work out.

“Yarrgh! This gets so tedious. From you it’s always the same, every time you tell a story it’s macho, it’s danger, it’s violence, stupid heroics.” Florry gestured wildly with her arms, then stumbled on the trail. “Whoops.”

Swanny grabbed her belt and pulled her back from the cliff-edge. Below them the cliff sheared off against the wind in two hundred foot steps, six of them to the bottom that leveled gradually into a system of chaparral washes with broad strokes of yellow aster, stipples of purple vetch, junipers here and there, an isolate ponderosa.

“And in all your stories I’m always dead. I resent it,” Florry said.

“I’m just trying to get us up the trail,” said Swanny.

“Even you die in this one.” She looked Swanny in the face. “Can’t you tell nice stories where people live fulfilling lives with happy endings?”

“Of course. Look at us. Here we are in the fresh air. Smell that air. What could be happier?”

“And both of us are dead. You must wish the kids were dead too.”

“Where did the kids go?” Swanny quickly scanned the area.

“They couldn’t stand your stories anymore, so they jumped off the cliff. Why would our story have a happy ending?” She saw the concern in Swanny’s face. “No. I’m only kidding.” They embraced and pressed against the cliff wall as ravens zigged and gossiped above them. They separated and watched the acrobats dip down into the canyon.

“That’s the raven, *Corvus Corax*, largest member of the crow family,” Florry said.

“Baby, you know all the names,” Swanny said.

“Confucius says the beginning of wisdom is getting to know things by their right names.”

“Wisdom accepts no names.”

They came to a small spring bubbling from some rocks. Columbine bent in bloom out of the cracks. The water was cooling as Florry splashed it against her face.

“It feels like silk, like pushing your face into Portia’s closet. She loved silk.”

“Portia from Portland?”

“Yes. Portia’s father began his fortune importing port from Oporto in Portugal. He became important in Bridgeport when he imported silk from Port Arthur, using Shreveport as a Port of Entry.”

“That portended the importance of his portfolio.”

“A portly porterhouse of a man, Portia’s pop. Her closets cool with silks.”

“Portcullis,” said Swanny.

“What do you mean?”

“I just needed to say that word.”

They both laughed and embraced because they knew how much words, just words, kept them together. Swanny splashed a double handful of water against his face, then drank some.

“This water might have *Giardia* in it.”

“What’s that?”

“An organism. Makes you sick.”

“Hey,” Swanny slurped big palmfuls. “That organism never met this organism. We’ve got a stomach like the belly of a tank.”

“When have you ever been in the belly of a tank?”

“Do you need an answer to that?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. I was one of General Patton’s favorite baby soldiers.”

“Now I suppose you’ll have to tell me that story.” She took his hand and they stood watching the spring like fiancés checking rings in the window of a jewelry store. “Aren’t you going to tell me that story?”

“What story?”

“The General Patton’s favorite baby soldier story.”

“I thought you didn’t want to hear any more stories.”

“I never said that. I just want a different kind of story. No violence for a change. No death. Especially not mine.”

“Many years ago, when I was in the south of Italy, we were advancing on a little town called Salerno. I was just another G.I. in the tank corps, and believe me the battle of Salerno was long and bloody.”

“And you were just eleven years old.”

“General Patton’s favorite baby soldier. I was the youngest man in the tank corps.”

“And I bet you died.”

“I was shaving already. I was mature for my age. Twenty-year-old women talked to me. And you’re wrong, I didn’t die there, but I lost my best buddy there, Gitley. Sick Gitley. His name was Ed, but we called him Sick because whenever something happened he’d say, ‘This is sick. I’m gonna call in sick.’ He worked for the telephone company before the war and that’s where he learned the tricks about calling in. You see I was a navigator and he was a gunner and we were rolling towards Salerno; I mean, General Patton wouldn’t let us sleep. It was stupid. We took a hit

from a friendly bazooka, a nice shell manufactured in Secaucus. A piece of Jersey blasted us. I don't know how it missed me. I heard it pierce, like a thunk, and then whistle by my head. So stupid. Shrapnel tore him open."

"There you go again. I bet his guts spill out."

"Listen to the story. I saw Sick folded over his belly. He looked like he was sick. The tank was full of smoke, but the hatch had blown open, and we could get out if we hurried. I grabbed Sick under the arms but as I straightened him up his guts slopped down like wet laundry. I tried to shove it all back inside him. 'Listen to me, Sick,' I said. 'You'll be okay. I'll get us out of here.' 'I'm going to call in sick,' were the last words I heard him say. I started to drag him up the ladder and bubbles of crimson frothed from his mouth."

"Please don't be so descriptive."

"This is not description. This happens in the story. He was crying, and I pulled him another step and then heard this sound like air letting out of a balloon, and I saw a piece of his intestine had caught on a ripped pipe that tore it open, and there was his liver torn up too, and you can't live without your liver, and I felt suddenly he got heavier and realized he was dead. The tank was ready to blow. It was hot. I knew I'd better get out myself, so I dropped him. He was my best buddy, Sick Gitley. Florry, he never had a chance. As I ran away I was knocked on my face by the explosion, out cold as the thing blew."

"You could have spared me that story, Swanny, since it never happened. I don't need some makebelieve violence and gore."

"You don't like violence, that's for sure. Women don't, though sometimes they appreciate gore. I don't like it either, but these are words. And what are words? A part of life! What I really want to tell you about happens after this, in the town of Salerno in the toe of the boot of Italy for there she dwelled, the fair signorina by the name of Cuccicucci, Signorina Alphon-sina Cuccicucci."

"Okay. Enough. Save it for the walking."

For a few moments they were silent and in the silence they kissed several times. Then Florry spoke: "Those columbine are in the buttercup family, genus *Aquilegia*. You see, Swanny, the coloration may be due to pigments on the flower's surface, or to the selective scattering of certain wavelengths of light, as in the blue of the sky, or to small discontinuities in the subsurface structure, or the interference of light-beams reflected from interior surfaces,

or to a combination of some or all of these effects.” Florry stood up and spread her arms and gestured at the sun, “You! You up there. Cool it!” She looked at Swanny. “I have a love-hate relationship with that heavenly body.” They both had tears in their eyes. “The pigment is probably one of the anthocyanins that forms water soluble glycosides to make this blue.” She reached out to wipe away Swanny’s tears with her fingertips. “That blue is the blue of this columbine, Swanny, this *Aquilegia coerulea* of the Rockies, state flower of Colorado.”

“But this isn’t Colorado.”

“I know that, Swanny. But this is the kind of story that I tell. Sometimes you need to listen to my stories. But why do you cry, Swanny?”

“I’m thinking of the kids, and the beauty of our planet, and how we ruined it for our kids.”

“Where are the kids?” Florry looked around. “Kids,” she shouted. Silence responded.

“The kids are on the trail,” Swanny said. “They must be on the trail. We’ll catch up to them. This is Utah. Kids are safe in Utah, and I think it’s time for us to mosey on, darling. Do you remember how to mosey?”

“Of course, and I’m ready to, because I know we have miles to go before the sun descends, causing the apparent color of the sky to shift towards the red end of the visible spectrum.”

Swanny slipped two quarter-section survey maps out of a tube and laid them on the ground. He ran his finger along the brown elevation lines, stopping where they were bunched together. “This is where we are.” Swanny’s finger moved along a dotted line that indicated a trail across the elevation lines spread out to make a broad plateau. “And this is where we’re going.”

“Green is not the best color, not my favorite, though I would love the green flash if I could get to see it. Anyone would, but so few of us are ever lucky enough to see it, just at sundown, the upper limb of the sun gives off a flash of green just as it drops below the horizon, a green flash. That would be my favorite kind of green.” She kissed him on the ear.

“So you see this protuberance here, pokes out like a thing?” Swanny took her finger, placed it on the spot on the map. “That’s called Kelly’s Thumb.”

“The thumb is my favorite finger.”

“I know that, Florry.”

“How do you know that?”

“You’re not married as long as we are without knowing things like that about the other person. Except I don’t know if the thumb is a finger, or is it just a thumb?”

“I don’t care. I like it best.”

“They say that where we’re going the spring water tastes like raspberries.”

“That would be a nice surprise. In some places raspberries are plentiful.”

“The water is even a little pink. And this guy, Alphonse Kelly, he had a Senegalese mother and an Irish father, buried a fortune in gold and gems right there, somewhere around that spring. All we have to do is go there and find them.”

“Let’s go. Except I hope you’re not making this up.”

“If I’m making it up, then it’s my story, and I can guarantee the stuff will be there. But first I have to tell you, there could be someone else besides us.”

“Who?”

“The guy who gave me the map was a top sergeant in my tank division in Italy.”

“You’re still too young to have had a tank division.”

“General Patton’s favorite baby soldier. Purple heart, too. When I came back to my senses after my tank blew up I found myself lying in a hospital bed in an army hospital in Salerno. Our nurse was a beautiful Italian woman, her name was Signorina Alfonsina Cuccicucci. She took care of me, and she took care of Sarge, who was in the bed next to me. I wasn’t so bad off, just a concussion, a broken wrist, and a mashed nose, so I would help her out. I’d adjust Sarge’s pillow, I’d slip the bedpan under his square butt, I’d light him a cigarette and smoke it with him. Both his hands had been blown off, and he lost a piece of his skull. He was a sad Sarge.”

“No more stories.”

“Anyway, just before he kicked the bucket he gave me instructions to get to this treasure. A little slip of paper. He said, in his failing voice, ‘This is for real, Swanny. You’re the only person I’m giving this to, except for . . .’ and he mumbled a name, seemed to start with a K, but I couldn’t make it out, then he passed into a coma. He was in the coma till he died a week after I left the hospital.”

“So it didn’t have to be another person. It could have been a warning, anything.”

“You’re getting close, Florry.”

“A danger, like a curse put on the treasure by Indians, or that it’s protected by cougars—that could sound like a K.”

“You’re getting warm. You’re getting hot, Florry honey.”

“And it could be anything, and we could make it into anything, our own private sweepstakes if we want to.”

“O God, Florry. Let’s do it. Let’s make love.”

“Love? Here?”

“Yes. Let’s do it.”

“Not here. Not love. It’s not the right moment. Besides, you can’t make love. Love happens.”

“Okay, then let’s go find that treasure, and then we’ll be rich. Love happens when you’re rich. We’ll be the richest couple on Crosby Street, and we can buy that loft and build you that studio and you can become the greatest artist of all time, who is also a woman.”

“And you can finish law school and open an office to defend the rights of the underprivileged, the disabled, the homeless and downtrodden, and you won’t turn anyone away, will you Swanny, not even the refugees, not even if they are fascists fleeing the people’s revolution, and then you can run for president and win and we’ll bring a new era of peace and understanding to the world, and I’ll be your first lady, first artist first lady. Or maybe I’ll be president, and you’ll be my first lady, the first male first lady, America’s most macho first lady, and you could tell stories to the whole country, and I’ll be the first woman, first artist, first president. I think we’d be happy in the White House.”

“It’ll be hamburger heaven. Fat city. We’ll be on easy street. Smashola fabiola. We’ll be on the biggest roll of all time, in this world or any other. Five aces in every hand. We’ll make all the inside straights. Canasta canasta and gin to win. So let’s do it, Florry. Let’s get off our butts, baby, and go get that treasure.” Swanny stood up, rolled up the maps, and stuffed them back in the tube.

“Just a second,” Florry stopped. “Where are the kids?”

“The kids?”

“Yeah, our kids. They came with us when we started out.”

“You’re right,” said Swanny. “They were with us. What are their names? I forgot. God, am I a lousy father.” He smacked the side of his head. “But you know what I think, that maybe it doesn’t matter. And you know

what I think, maybe Sarge's K was kids. And you know what I'll bet? I'll bet they're already there. I'll bet they found the treasure. And I bet they're waiting for us to come be a happy family together. A rich happy family."

After their struggle to climb to the top, the level trail was a relief, as if they hardly had to touch the ground. It squirted merrily through sage and rabbitbrush, crossing shallow arroyos, wiggling to the horizon. Florry sang as she walked—"They call me mellow yellow, wang bang boof . . ." and Swanny skipped around in front and back and sang, "Stop, in the name of love. . . ."

A covey of sage hen flew up and sailed off on squeaky wings, and the couple leaned against each other to watch.

"The sage hen is a kind of grouse, a prairie chicken," said Florry. "Its coloration, different from that of its cousin on the great plains, protects it here in the sagebrush."

"I believe it. You're telling the truth, Florry."

"Swanny, these males have some bright-colored air-sacs, and in the spring, when courtship season rolls around, they gather just before daylight at the mating ground to wait to be chosen by a hen."

"O yeah, I hear you Florry. Chosen by a hen. Say it again. Chosen. Chosen. Chosen by a hen."

"And so what these prairie roosters do, Swanny, is in that place, on that mating ground, they puff up their colorful air-sacs, Swanny, and their feathers stand up straight around their bodies like quills, yes, and they position themselves about six feet apart, yes, and shuffle their feet, yes, and dance back and forth, yes, yes, dancing back and forth, yes, making sounds, deep loud sounds, yes, pumping sounds, yes."

"*Owoompah, owoompah, owoompah*," said Swanny.

"Yes," said Florry. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

"What happens now?"

"Females gather to check out the display."

"Females. Gathering. What do they do?"

"They select the brightest and the strongest of the males, the hottest display. Each of them picks one."

"Don't stop. Then what? What do they do? Do they do it?"

"Once the selection is made the female almost immediately starts to build her nest." Florry kissed Swanny on the cheek.

"Don't they mate?"

“Yeah.”

“Let’s mate, Florry.”

Florry looked about at the horizons, the mountains purpling the North, and she thought how exasperating males were. “It’s not even mating season, Swanny. Besides, we’ve mated many times already. Night in, night out we’ve mated. We are human beings, and that makes a difference. We can mate when we want. Once we find the treasure we can do it on the treasure. Let’s establish that right now.”